Problems down the Road for Military Recruiting -- and More

-- Rick Jahnkow

During the last few years, the U.S. military has experienced significant difficulty meeting goals for new recruits. In Fiscal Year 2022, for example, the Army fell 25 percent short of its goal. The Air Force and Navy have experienced similar shortfalls in recent years. Adding to the problem for the Army is the fact that almost one-fourth of all new Army recruits are not completing their initial enlistment terms.

In the last fiscal year, the military has met its enlistment goals, but only because it has significantly lowered acceptance standards and channeled low-performing applicants into pre-boot camp training programs. These efforts have allowed individuals to enlist who previously would have been rejected and who may wind up adding to the high first-term dropout rate.

The question now is how will recruiting be affected by the extreme anti-DEI policies imposed on the military by the Trump administration? According to a CNN report (3/19/25), Trump's directives have led to a "massive purge of Pentagon websites," with content being removed on subjects like Holocaust remembrance and suicide prevention. Trainings that were initiated to address the military's serious problem with sexual assaults have been discontinued, as well as events celebrating African American history. Even the WWII military record of Jackie Robinson has been removed. Furthermore, Transgender people are now banned from enlisting. All of these actions will drive away some of the prospective enlistees whom the military was counting on to help fill recruitment quotas that are already barely being met.

A further disincentive for enlistment will be President Trump's belligerent approach to international relations. Young members of Gen Z, the demographic that is most critical of U.S. political policy, would soon realize that entering the military can mean carrying out the imperialistic goals of Trump in places like Gaza, Panama and Greenland. Additionally, based on public statements that have been made by Trump, they could also be ordered to attack cartels in Mexico. Even now, military personnel and planes are being used to deport migrants and refugees, many of whom may live in communities where the military is seeking to recruit. How will soldiers coming from those communities react when they are ordered to help deport people they might know -- possibly even family members?

As all of these realities sink into the minds of the military-age population, it could turn the recent recruiting shortfalls into the worst ever faced by the U.S. military. However, one possible development that could help the Pentagon is a sudden jump in unemployment arising from the Trump economic recession that many are predicting. Another factor that could aid military recruiting would be diminishing access to higher education caused by Trump's dismantling of the Department of Education and an inevitable tightening of restrictions on federal student aid.

In light of all of the above, perhaps we can be hopeful that the conditions will soon be ripe for a new youth-led movement that challenges militarism and its links to other critical issues. It may even make the social and political upheaval of the 1960s pale in comparison!

Information sources:

"Army misses recruiting goal by 15,000 soldiers," Army Times *10/2/2022*

"The Army is Losing Nearly One-quarter of Soldiers in the First 2 Years of Enlistment," military.com, 3/7/2025.

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